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Purity for Priests
22: 1-9

Purity for priests DIG: Why did the priests need to be careful with regard to the sacred sacrifices on the bronze altar? Why was it important for a priest not to touch a dead body? What did it mean for a priest to be unclean? What did it mean to be "cut off" from YHVH?

REFLECT: What do these verses imply about the attitude necessary for anyone to approach ADONAI? How would you depict your own attitude in approaching God? Casual or formal? Confident? What is "unclean" in your world? What do you have to be careful to avoid?

Priests had the privilege of handling God's holy items. But with such privilege came great responsibility,
for now they risked disrespecting those items, and the One who owned them.



The reason for **the priesthood's** added concerns around ritual **purity** was **their** regular contact with **the Tabernacle/Temple** and **the sacred offerings** within. **ADONAI said to Moshe, "Tell Aaron and his sons to be extremely careful with the sacred offerings that the Israelites set apart for me. So, they do not bring shame on My holy Name. I am the LORD.** This phrase occurs many times throughout **Leviticus.** It occurs at the beginning and end of this chapter. It

affirms **the holiness** of what **YHVH** has received and warns against giving **Him** less than the best or treating **His** offerings with disrespect **(22:1-2).**[388] The verses that follow provide the details and consequences of such actions. The first mitzvah is that **impure/unclean priests** may not come into contact with **the sacred offerings**.

Tell them, "Any descendant of yours through all your generations who approaches the sacred offerings that the people of Isra'el dedicate to ADONAI and is unclean will be cut off from before Me; I am ADONAI" (22:3). The general principle first appears here, then again in **verse 9**. **In rabbinic literature the penalty is called *karet*, or "cutting off." In priestly literature, the penalty of *karet* was understood to include a series of related punishments at the hand of God, ranging from the immediate death of an offender, as in 20:17, to his premature death at a later time, and even to the death of his descendants. In Mishnah Sanhedrin 9:6 and Mishnah Keritot 1:2, this penalty was characterized as *mitah biydei shamayim*, or "death at the hands of heaven." Since in 7:20-21 *karet* is mentioned in the context as childlessness, there is the implication that it took that course as well.**[389]

Any descendant of Aaron with tzara'at (**to see link click Bv – The Test of Tzara'at**) **or a discharge is not to eat the holy things until he is clean.** Then **Moshe**, inspired by **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh** mentions several examples. **Any priest who has touched a person made unclean by a dead body (22:4a). Corpse** contamination was suggested earlier, where **the bodies** of **Nadab** and **Abihu** were removed by using **their** tunics as the means of lifting **them**. This prevented direct contact with **the bodies** (see **Bh – The Death of Nadab and Abihu**). In **21:11** the Bible prohibited **a high priest** from being in the same room or building as **a corpse**. Such strict separation of **the corpse** and **the high priest** was also demanded for the other **priests**. **They** could only **mourn** the loss of **close family members** (see **Do – Prohibited Practices for the Priests: The priests and the dead**).

Any priest who has had a seminal emission would **be unclean (22:4b).** The reference to the emission of semen recalls the earlier description (see **Cm – Male Chronic Uncleanness: Normal male discharges**). And **touching a** detestable **reptile or insect** could also **make him unclean** recalls **Leviticus 11**. Not only are detestable **creatures unclean** to **eat (11:10, 20-23, 29, 31,** and **41-44)**, **they** are also **unclean** for **priests** to **touch**. **Or a man who is unclean for any reason**

and who can transmit to him his uncleanness (22:5).[390] **The person who touches any of these will be unclean until evening and is not to eat the holy food of God unless he bathes his body in water (22:6). Sacrificial offerings** are often called *lehem*, translated **bread** or **food**, and, at least in a symbolic sense, are considered **bread** for **YHVH**. **The priests** needed to observe strict codes of **purity** for **they** were the mediators between the worshiper and **ADONAI**.[391] Therefore, **they** were expressly warned not to serve or offer **sacrifices** at **the bronze altar** while in a state of ritual **impurity** (see **Ah – The Offerings from the People's Perspective**).

After sunset he will be clean (22:7a). After sunset on the day of **his immersion**, a person was regarded as **clean** and able to enter into the Tabernacle/Temple and partake of the sacrificial service. In the way the Bible calculates time, **sunset** marks the beginning of the new day. This principle is reiterated here for the benefit of **the priesthood**.

And afterwards, the priest could eat the holy things; because they were his food (22:7b). Sacrificial **offerings** are often called *lehem*, translated **bread** or **food**, and, at least in a symbolic sense, are considered **bread** for **YHVH**. **The priests** needed to observe strict codes of purity for **they** were the mediators between the worshiper and **ADONAI**.[392] It seems that what gave **God** great joy was the fact that **He** was obeyed by worshipful people who offered **the** prescribed **sacrifices** just as **He** had commanded. This is what pleased **Ha'Shem** and **the offering** became a sweet aroma to **Him**. In other words, **God's bread** was **mankind's** seeking to draw near to **Him**.[393]

But he was **not to eat anything that died naturally or** was **torn to death by wild animals and thereby** making **himself unclean; I am ADONAI.** A similar statement occurs in **Ezeki'el 44:31**. In **Leviticus 17:15** this same prohibition is addressed to all **Israelites**, and similar commandments are addressed to **the Israelite people** in **Exodus 22:30** and **Deuteronomy 14:21**. It is likely, therefore, that this very ancient prohibition was repeated here for emphasis in the mitzvot specifically addressed to **priests**.[394]

Just as the common **Israelite** was forbidden from **eating** of **the peace offerings** (see **Ak – The Peace Offerings: At Peace with God**) while in a state of ritual **impurity**, **the priests** were forbidden from **eating** of the **priestly** portions of the **sacrifices** while in a state of ritual **impurity**. **A priest** who flaunted these prohibitions and intentionally **ate the priestly** portions while in a state of ritual

impurity risked an untimely end. **The priest must observe this charge of mind; otherwise, if they profane it, they will bear the consequences of their sin for doing so and die in it.** In all but the most serious cases of ritual contamination, a person need only immerse himself (and often his clothes) and then wait until **sunset** before being deemed **clean** again. And to provide the motivation for following these mitzvot, **YHVH** declared: **I am ADONAI, who makes them holy (22:9).**

The priests needed to be particularly diligent about these matters. By handling **the sacrifices** in a state of ritual **impurity**, **they** could invalidate **the sacrifice**, defile **the bronze altar**, and defile the **priestly** portions of **the sacrifices**. **The warning about waiting until sunset after immersion before eating the sacrifices counted as one of the 613 commands of the Torah.**[395] **Priests** had the privilege of handling **the LORD's holy items**. But with such privilege came great responsibility, for now **they** risked disrespecting those **items** – and **ADONAI** who owned them – if **they** mishandled **them**. Those with special privileges in the affairs of **YHVH** must treat their responsibilities with absolute seriousness: **Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, since you know that we will be judged more severely (James 3:1).**[396]

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** that **You** are such a **holy** and pure **God (Isaiah 6:3)**! I love being **Your** child **(John 1:12)**. But with the privilege of being in **Your** family, comes the responsibility to act **holy**, for **You** are **holy**. Salvation is a wonderful gift but not something that can be taken for granted **(Romans 5:17)**. Being **joined** with **You** unites us together, both in **Your death** to sin and in **Your** resurrection to life. **For if we have become joined together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also will be joined together in His resurrection (Romans 6:5). Your** purpose, set forth in **Messiah**, has always been a wonderful union with **You**. **You** planned from before creation **(Ephesians 1:4)** to make those who love **You holy**, by adoption into **Your** family -uniting them in **Messiah**. **Making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Messiah as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:9-10).** It is such a joy to be **united** with **You** and so with great pleasure we seek to live **holy** lives to please **You.** In **Yeshua's holy** name and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*